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SUBJECT: NATO SYG DE HOOP SCHEFFER DISCUSSES GAZA CONFLICT
WITH GOI OFFICIALS

Classified By: Acting POLCOUNS Peter Vrooman, reasons 1.4 (b),(d)

1. (C) Summary: During his January 11-12 visit to Israel, NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer discussed the Gaza conflict with Defense Minister Barak, Foreign Minister Livni, Prime Minister Olmert, and Likud Party leader Netanyahu. De Hoop Scheffer said Barak suggested the duration of the conflict was entirely dependent on whether Egypt was successful in persuading Hamas to agree to a lasting ceasefire with a cessation of rocket launches into Israel and weapons smuggling along the Philadelphi corridor. If so, the IDF's Operation Cast Lead could end in "two to three days" time. If not, de Hoop Scheffer said Barak argued Israel has no choice but to re-occupy Gaza for possibly two years. De Hoop Scheffer said differences existed in the GOI leadership regarding a continued IDF operation, with Livni and Barak to a lesser extent cognizant of the harmful effect the operation has had on Israel's image in the international community. De Hoop Scheffer said Olmert and Netanyahu made the strategic argument that the conflict was "not about Gaza," but rather a proxy war against Iran and Islamic extremism. According to de Hoop Scheffer, Olmert and Netanyahu also said Israeli intelligence agencies assess that Hamas has rockets with 100 km ranges. Finally, de Hoop Scheffer said he did not discuss with GOI interlocutors a possible NATO role in any international entity along the Philadelphi corridor; he said NATO Allies would agree with GOI interlocutors that an expanded NATO role might be possible following a comprehensive peace in the region. De Hoop Scheffer (DHS) briefed members of the diplomatic community regarding his visits to Jordan and Israel on January 12. End summary.

Gaza Conflict

2. (C) NATO SYG de Hoop Scheffer (DHS) noted the majority of his January 11-12 visit to Israel was spent discussing the Gaza conflict with Defense Minister Barak, Foreign Minister Livni, and Likud Party leader Netanyahu. According to DHS, Barak was not certain how long the current operation would continue, suggesting its duration was entirely dependent on whether Egypt could persuade Hamas to accept a lasting ceasefire with a cessation of rocket fire at Israel and weapons smuggling along the Philadelphi corridor. If so, Barak said the operation could end in "two to three days." If not, DHS said Barak stated that Israel would have no choice but to re-occupy Gaza and remain there for "one to two years." Barak added that the GOI was concerned such an occupation would present even greater opportunities for enemies of Israel to kidnap IDF soldiers.

3. (C) DHS said he tried to convince his Israeli interlocutors that a continued IDF operation risks further alienating the international community. He pointed to recent demonstrations and suggested support in Europe and the Arab world ("the Arab and European streets") decidedly favored the plight of Palestinians in Gaza. DHS said he expressed concerns to his Jordanian interlocutors that moderate Arab

voices such as Jordan will be lost as a result of the conflict. He added this argument seemed to resonate with Livni and Barak to a lesser extent, but much less so with Olmert and Netanyahu.

14. (C) DHS said both Olmert and Netanyahu made the argument that the current IDF operation was "not about Gaza," but rather a proxy conflict with Iran. He said Netanyahu argued from a strategic perspective that Iran posed an existential threat to Israel. While the GOI was taking on Iran and Islamic extremism, other Western countries were not "doing enough." DHS said both Olmert and Netanyahu stressed that GOI intelligence agencies assess that Hamas possesses but has yet to use rockets with 100 km ranges.

15. (C) DHS said that there was no discussion with GOI interlocutors of a possible NATO role in any international presence along the Philadelphia corridor to prevent further weapons smuggling. He said GOI officials stressed that responsibility lies with Egypt to seal its side of the border to prevent further smuggling. DHS noted that Olmert suggested several different options regarding the border: continue to bomb tunnels crossing the border, seal the border, or have an international entity monitor the border. DHS said Olmert opined a combination of all three options might be warranted.

NATO Business

16. (C) DHS thanked the Canadian Embassy for hosting his brief, and for assuming Contact Point Embassy (CPE)

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responsibilities for Israel at NATO. He noted that from the perspective of NATO business, the NATO-Israel relationship is going strong. He characterized the GOI as "happy" in its relations with NATO, but will continue to push for a NATO Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) and closer contacts with the NATO Maintenance and Supply Organization (NAMS). DHS characterized Israel's Individual Cooperation Program as a "major achievement," and opined that NATO could stand to benefit from Israeli expertise on unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and counter IED technology.

17. (C) DHS said he was struck by how much NATO was not much of a topic of discussion during his visit. He said GOI officials made vague references to a stronger NATO role in the region following a comprehensive peace, and said NATO Allies agree with that assessment. In previous interactions with Israel, de Hoop Scheffer said there was always a lively discussion of whether future conditions might allow for Israeli NATO membership - but that discussion was largely absent during this visit. Asked if NATO might have a peacekeeping role in Gaza, de Hoop Scheffer replied that such a role lay outside NATO's purview. From a personal perspective, he listed the provision of humanitarian assistance and the remediation of unexploded ordnance as two critical functions requiring immediate attention following a ceasefire.

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